

“The Future of Historical Medical Libraries in the Digital Age” A One-Day Hybrid Conference at the New York Academy of Medicine

Overview

“We read the future through the lens of the past.” A decade ago, prominent library leaders convened a conference on “Emerging Roles for Historical Medical Libraries: Value in the Digital Age.” This event offered a fruitful opportunity for librarians and researchers to discuss the challenges and opportunities presented by the digital age. A decade on, in the era of rapidly evolving AI and other information tools, in an age of great distrust in science and scholarship, what is now the best role for historical libraries with extensive collections in print and manuscript form?

Originally serving the medical community, historical medical libraries have seen their users fall off as clinical information moved into the digital sphere, and as medical educators and practitioners have grown less engaged with their past. The collections remain of interest to health care professionals and scholars interested in history, the social sciences, and medical humanities, as well as to creative developers such as documentary filmmakers. Historical Medical Libraries have also provided vital educational services. In the current form, **much** content does not readily reach broader audiences, who are increasingly attuned to digital content rather than physical materials.

As our world becomes increasingly dependent upon electronic communication, historical medical libraries will need to adapt and evolve in a variety of ways. Although many historical libraries have undertaken digitization projects of their content, owing to increased costs and declining usage, the Medical Heritage Library has recently announced its closure after fifteen years of dedicated service. Going forward many questions arise: What new education and social roles might historical repositories take on? What new educational tools and methods will need to be employed? What new scholarly and lay audiences can historical collections reach, and how? How should legacy print and digitized collections coexist and be used in an increasingly digital information world? How can new and intelligent technologies assist historical medical libraries in meeting their challenges? What responsibilities do libraries have to support the broader world of historical and humanistic scholarship? Conversely, what responsibilities do scholars have to the repositories that they rely on? Finally, how best can we—or should we—shape a common goal/mission for historical medical libraries?

To discuss and help answer these questions, the New York Academy of Medicine is convening a one-day meeting with representatives of some of the significant historical medical libraries in the United States and the United Kingdom, other library leaders of specialized collections, and leaders harnessing technology to better store and readily access needed information. We will gather to collectively explore key issues in the field. While the focus of the discussion will be historical medical libraries, the conclusions should be of interest to special collections libraries generally.

Conference Aims:

1. Determine how HMLs can evolve to meet the needs of their community of users in a world where information needs are increasingly being met by digital media.
2. Specify what changes are needed, and how HMLs should implement them individually and collectively.
3. Identify the barriers that are preventing HMLs from working effectively with the information technology community and recommend ways to address those barriers (for example, through collaboration).
4. Suggest the organizational and fiscal components to support any resulting new ventures.

Venue and Dates

This event will take place September 25, in-person at the New York Academy of Medicine, 1216 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY, as well as through Zoom. A small working group will meet the morning of September 26, to finalize next steps to develop overall recommendations and a summary of conference proceedings.

Format

- Introduction: Setting the themes.
- Keynote: The interplay of technology and cultural institutions.
- Three guided conversations, one each on the three focal questions determined by the planning committee and advisors. Each conversation features presentations from leaders in the field, a facilitator, and participant attendees.
- Summary: Challenges clarified, a potential roadmap, and next steps.
- A subgroup meeting to develop the work of the conference.

Program Committee

- Ann Kurth

President and Fellow, NYAM

- Vimla L. Patel
NYAM Fellow; Senior Research Scientist, Cognitive Studies in Medicine and Public Health, NYAM
- Paul Theerman (chair)
Director, Library and Center for the History of Medicine and Public Health, NYAM
- David J. Wolf
NYAM Fellow; member, Executive Committee of the Fellows Section on the History of Medicine and Public Health; book collector

Advisors

- Michelle DiMeo
Vice President of Collections and Programs and Arnold Thackray Director, Othmer Library, Science History Institute, Philadelphia
- Melissa Grafe
John R. Bumstead Librarian for Medical History & Head of the Medical Historical Library, Yale School of Medicine
- Jeffrey Reznick
Senior Historian, National Library of Medicine

Publications and Dissemination of Conference Outcome

Publication

NYAM plans to publish the conference proceedings in a high-impact journal and present its recommendations at other venues such as the annual meetings of the Librarians, Archivists, and Museum Professionals in the History of the Health Sciences, the American Association for the History of Medicine, and the RBMS, The Rare Books and Manuscripts Section, American Library Association.

Another goal of the conference is to recommend and publish ways and means to enhance more productive relationships between historical medical libraries and a variety of digital resources such as the Internet Archive, HathiTrust, and Google Health.

Bibliography

Papers of the 2013 conference, "Emerging Roles for Historical Medical Libraries: Value in the Digital Age," were published as a special issue of *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage*, Vol 15, No 2 (2014):

<https://rbm.acrl.org/index.php/rbm/issue/view/57/showToc>, edited by Michelle DiMeo and Jeffrey S. Reznick.

Committed Speakers

Babak Ashrafi, Consortium for the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine.

Michelle DiMeo, Science History Institute.

Sandra Enimil, Yale University.

Melissa Grafe, Yale University.

Jeremy Greene, Johns Hopkins University.

Polina Ilieva, University of California—San Francisco.

Lise Jaillant, Loughborough University, UK.

Ann Kurth, New York Academy of Medicine; Fellow, New York Academy of Medicine.

Trevor Owens, American Institute of Physics.

Jeff Reznick, National Library of Medicine.

Edward H. Shortliffe, Columbia University; Fellow, New York Academy of Medicine.

Paul Theerman, New York Academy of Medicine.

David J. Wolf, Weill Cornell Medicine; Fellow, New York Academy of Medicine.

Borui Zhang, University of Florida.

Conference Agenda

September 25, Room 20, NYAM

9:00–9:15 AM	Welcome: Ann Kurth, President, and Paul Theerman, Library Director, NYAM.
9:15–9:30 AM	Conference overview and keynote introduction: Melissa Grafe, Medical History Library, Yale University.

9:30–10:15 AM	Keynote Address: Trevor Owens, Chief Research Officer, American Institute of Physics.
10:15–11:15 AM	Question 1: Michelle DiMeo, Science History Institute, Philadelphia, and Polina Ilieva, University of California—San Francisco, addressing “ <i>What new roles are historical medical libraries taking up in today’s world?</i> ” [Facilitator TBD.]
11:15–11:45 AM	Break— <i>optional tours of NYAM Library highlights in the Collier Rare Book Room.</i>
11:45 AM–12:45 PM	Question 2: Lise Jaillant, Loughborough University, UK, and Borui Zhang, University of Florida Libraries, addressing “ <i>What interplay between technology and collections—both physical and digital—can best serve historical libraries’ new roles?</i> ” [Facilitator TBD.]
12:45–2:00 PM	Lunch & presentation by Jeremy Greene, Johns Hopkins University, introduced by David J. Wolf.
2:00–3:00 PM	Question 3: Babak Ashrafi, Consortium for the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine, and Jeff Reznick, National Library of Medicine, addressing “ <i>What new organization structures would best enable historical libraries to fulfill their new roles?</i> ” Facilitated by Edward H. Shortliffe, Columbia University.
3:00–3:30 PM	Break— <i>optional tours of NYAM Library highlights in the Collier Rare Book Room.</i>
3:30–4:15 PM	Summary: Sandra Enimil, Program Director for Scholarly Communication and Information Policy, Yale University Libraries: “ <i>What we’ve learned; what we still need to know; next steps.</i> ”
4:15–4:30 PM	Concluding Remarks: Ann Kurth, President, and Paul Theerman, Library Director, NYAM.